



This prairie dog lives behind our house. He and his family have approximately 2 acres covered with holes and tunnels. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

# Prairie dogs

If there ever was an animal associated with the Great Plains, it has to be the prairie dog. They look like chubby little fur balls, but actually are fast, skilled fighters armed with long, sharp claws and powerful teeth.

Surprisingly, there are five different species of prairie dogs. These are the black-tailed, white-tailed, Gunnison's, Mexican and the Utah, with the most common being the black-tail, who inhabits the Great Plains.

Colorado is home to three species. The black-tail lives generally below 6,000 feet in altitude along all the eastern plains of the state. The white-tail lives in the shrub lands of North Park, the Wyoming Basin and the lower Colorado and Gunnison valleys, while the Gunnison's range is the San Luis Valley, South Park and a few areas to the south and west.

Prairie dogs are not actually dogs, but members of the squirrel family. They also share family with groundhogs, chipmunks, marmots and woodchucks. Their natural predators in the wild include eagles, hawks, falcons, snakes, badgers, coyotes and ferrets.

For most of us, it is probably pretty hard to distinguish between the five species, but probably not so, for them. Most reach between 1 to 3 pounds in weight and 12-to-15 inches in length, and sport a 3-to-4 inch tail. Their lifespan in the wild runs three to five years.

In captivity, a prairie dog can live eight years. I say "in captivity" because some people actually have them as pets. They are very attention demanding pets and with those powerful jaws, can deliver a very strong bite. I am not sure they are the kind of pet most of us would want.

What they are best known for are their

homes, called "towns." These underground burrows contain many tunnels and chambers marked by mounds of packed dirt at the surface entrances. This network of tunnels will contain nurseries for the young, sleeping quarters and even toilet areas.

These towns will have "listening posts" near openings, so prairie dogs can safely monitor the movements of predators outside the holes. Snakes, burrowing owls, and the rare black-footed ferret share these burrows, which hunt prairie dogs in their own burrows. The family group of each burrow usually consists of a male, several females and their young.

A town may support several hundred dogs and cover around 300 acres. The largest ever recorded town was located in Texas. It covered an estimated 25,000 square miles and was home to around 400 million prairie dogs.

The general diet of prairie dogs usually consists of grasses and vegetation. Usually, they choose moist and actively growing plants, but sometimes dine on an occasional grasshopper. Between their grazing and clipping, they can wipe out an area of vegetation in short order. This is the behavior that infuriates farmers and ranchers.

Agriculture people also have problems with the prairie dogs because of the number of holes that dig up in an area. These holes present a danger to horses and livestock, not to mention people. Ask anyone who has ever done a "one-legger" down a prairie dog holes what he or she thinks



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

about these critters. Prairie dogs have a complex system of communication that includes a variety of high-pitched warning barks that signal different types of predators. To us, the calls sound simple and repetitive, but recent research has found that those calls can convey incredibly descriptive details. For example, research suggests that the alert can even identify what type of predator is approaching and from which direction.

In contrast with popular perceptions, prairie dogs are not fast-multiplying rodents. They actually only mate once a year, in early winter. Females go into estrus for a single hour.

The gestation period averages 28 to 35 days with the pups being born in March and April. The typical litter will contain four to eight pups but only half will survive the first year.

One thing that threatens the prairie dogs is the bubonic plague or Black Death, as it was known in Europe. This plague entered the United States during the late 1800s via rats aboard European ships. The plague quickly spread through wild mammal populations, including the black-tailed prairie dogs of the Great Plains.

The disease is still rampant in large tracts of the region, and tends to wipe out entire prairie dog towns when it strikes. Back in 2007, I used to visit a town that covered around 1,500 acres. By 2009, the entire area was void of any dogs whatsoever, apparently because of an outbreak

of the plague. It took a full four years before I saw any new life in that town, and today, it is about a quarter populated as it once was.

Whenever you are out and about in an area of prairie dogs, you should take a few precautions. Wear insect repellent, containing DEET, especially around ankles, legs and feet to ward off any fleas that carry the disease. Avoid touching dead prairie dogs and stay away from their burrows.

Black-tailed prairie dogs were once thought to be the largest population of mammals on Earth, numbering near one billion. European settlers traveling west wrote about passing through massive prairie dog towns, some of which extended for miles. Their colonies probably occupied 40 to 80 million acres of land.

Over time, their range has shrunk to less than 5 percent of what it once was, covering only 1 to 2 million acres. The population estimate is somewhere between 10 and 20 million.

Some people can't stand prairie dogs but they are a very important part of our ecosystem. They are considered a "keystone" species because their colonies create islands of habitat that benefit approximately 150 other species. I know, I sure enjoy having them around.

*Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.*

## Reward offered in poaching case

STAFF REPORT

Colorado Parks and Wildlife is seeking information about the killing of two mountain goats, which were found shot at close range near the summit of Quandary Peak (Summit County) on July 3.

Thanks to donations, Colorado Operation Game Thief is

increasing the reward offer from \$1,000 to \$5,000 for information leading to an arrest or citation in the case.

The two goats, estimated to be between 1 and 2 years old, were discovered about half a mile from the summit and about 2.8 miles up the Quandary Peak Trail. They had been shot with a pistol. Anyone with information can

call or email Operation Game Thief at 1-877-265-6648 (1-877-COLO-OGT) or [game.thief@state.co.us](mailto:game.thief@state.co.us) to report any information. Callers or emailers may remain anonymous if they choose.

For more information on CPW regulations or stopping poachers, visit [cpw.state.co.us](http://cpw.state.co.us).

Find your

# HIDDEN Treasure!

The Montrose Daily Press Local Market Place

Find everything you know you want - and even things you didn't



montrosepress.com/classifieds